

CONSERVATION
IN ACTION

OKEFENOKEE

a National Wildlife Refuge

Number SIX

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OKEFENOKEE

A NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

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IF YOU TRAVEL MUCH in the wilder sections of our country, sooner or later you are likely to meet the sign of the flying goose—the emblem of the National Wildlife Refuges.

You may meet it by the side of a road crossing miles of flat prairie in the Middle West, or in the hot deserts of the Southwest. You may meet it by some mountain lake, or as you push your boat through the winding salty creeks of a coastal marsh.

Wherever you meet this sign, respect it. It means that the land behind the sign has been dedicated by the American people to preserving, for themselves and their children, as much of our native wildlife as can be retained along with our modern civilization.

Wild creatures, like men, must have a place to live. As civilization creates cities, builds highways, and drains marshes, it takes away, little by little, the land that is suitable for wildlife. And as their space for living dwindles, the wildlife populations themselves decline. Refuges resist this trend by saving some areas from encroachment, and by preserving in them, or restoring where necessary, the conditions that wild things need in order to live.

Cover: American egret in Okefenokee

Okefenokee

A N A T I O N A L W I L D L I F E R E F U G E

THE OKEFENOKEE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE is famed as one of the most primitive swamps in America. It is located in southeastern Georgia along the Florida boundary. East-west, Okefenokee extends about 25 miles, north-south, 40 miles. The total area, embracing nearly 700 square miles, is largely shallow water covered with aquatic blooms, and bordered by moss-bearded trees. The combination produces scenic effects of haunting, mysterious beauty.

There is a report that Ferdinand De Soto looked upon this land of "trembling earth" as early as 1539, although Okefenokee was still a blank space on the map when France laid claim to the region two centuries later. In 1750 the Seminole Indians were known to have villages on what are now Mitchell's, Billy's, and Floyd's Islands. Friendly at first, the Indians finally turned against the encroaching white settlers, using the vast, dark swamp as a hiding place between raids and massacres. This bloody era came to an end in 1838 when General Floyd reported to the War Department that he had marched through the swamp and had broken up the hide-outs of the marauding natives.

Okefenokee at that time was a dense forest rising above an understory of tangled vines and

brush, interspersed with mirror-like lakes and grassy marshes. The hammering of the now all-but-extinct ivory-billed woodpecker resounded among the dead cypress tops. Alligators roared from the dark-brown waters. Egrets and ibises flapped and soared. Bears, deer, and wildcats were abundant. The swamp was fairly alive with wildlife of many varieties. It was a paradise for hunters and trappers.

Okefenokee's natural beauty was first threatened in 1889 when attempts were made to drain the swamp with a view to facilitating timber removal and providing farm lands. But a costly canal—"Jackson's Folly"—dug 14 miles into Okefenokee from Camp Cornelia on its eastern edge resulted in more water flowing into the swamp instead of out. The project was abandoned. Loggers went ahead with other plans. Tram roads were built on piling driven through the soft muck into firm sand and soon the spurs of a narrow-gauge railroad penetrated deep into the wild mystery of the swamp. The ring of loggers' axes, the crashing and splashing of falling trees, the tooting of cabbage-head locomotives, drove the wildlife from one timber stand to another. Millions of board feet of cypress, pine, red bay, and gum came out of Okefenokee dur-



The rattling sonorous call of nesting sandhill cranes rises above the endless symphony of Okefenokee's many bird sounds.

ing the next 30 years. Not until the cream of the timber crop had been harvested were other values given much consideration.

But enough virgin stands of timber remained in remoter parts of the swamp, enough wild game survived to excite the interest of visitors, and in 1919 the Georgia Assembly set the area aside as a game reservation. Eighteen years later the land was purchased by the Federal Government, and on March 30, 1937, the President of the United States issued an Executive order

establishing the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, which is now administered by the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Improvements were made. Headquarters were erected at Camp Cornelia, 12 miles from Folkston on the east side of the refuge. Boat runs were cleared. Picnic shelters and cabins were constructed at a few favorable spots. Okefenokee the beautiful, with its glassy waters reflecting lily and shrub blooms and waving skeins of moss; Okefenokee, with its amazing wildlife; Okefenokee, with all its eerie beauty, became accessible as one of the show spots of America.

RISING ABOVE THE VARIED SOUNDS OF THE SWAMP at intervals are the loud "rusty-pump" whooping of the Florida crane and the far-reaching drumbeats of woodpeckers on shells of dead tree trunks. The squealing cry of the wood duck is heard, the discordant squawks of herons and egrets, the chattering of fox squirrels. At night one may hear the sudden screech of a wildcat and the lonesome hooting of owls. In the spring the bellowing of bull alligators contrasts with the fluting of mockingbirds and many other songbirds. Okefenokee is silent only in the heat of noonday.

Okefenokee is always beautiful, always fascinating; changing with the seasons, but always a scenic wonderland. Its many shallow expanses of water, known as "prairies" by local folk, bloom with color in spring and summer. Waterlilies are everywhere. The bladderwort and pickerelweed thrust purple flowers out into the sunshine. The yellow spikes of "never-wet," and the little white blossoms of floatinghearts—all reflected in glassy waters—help create an illusion of fairyland.

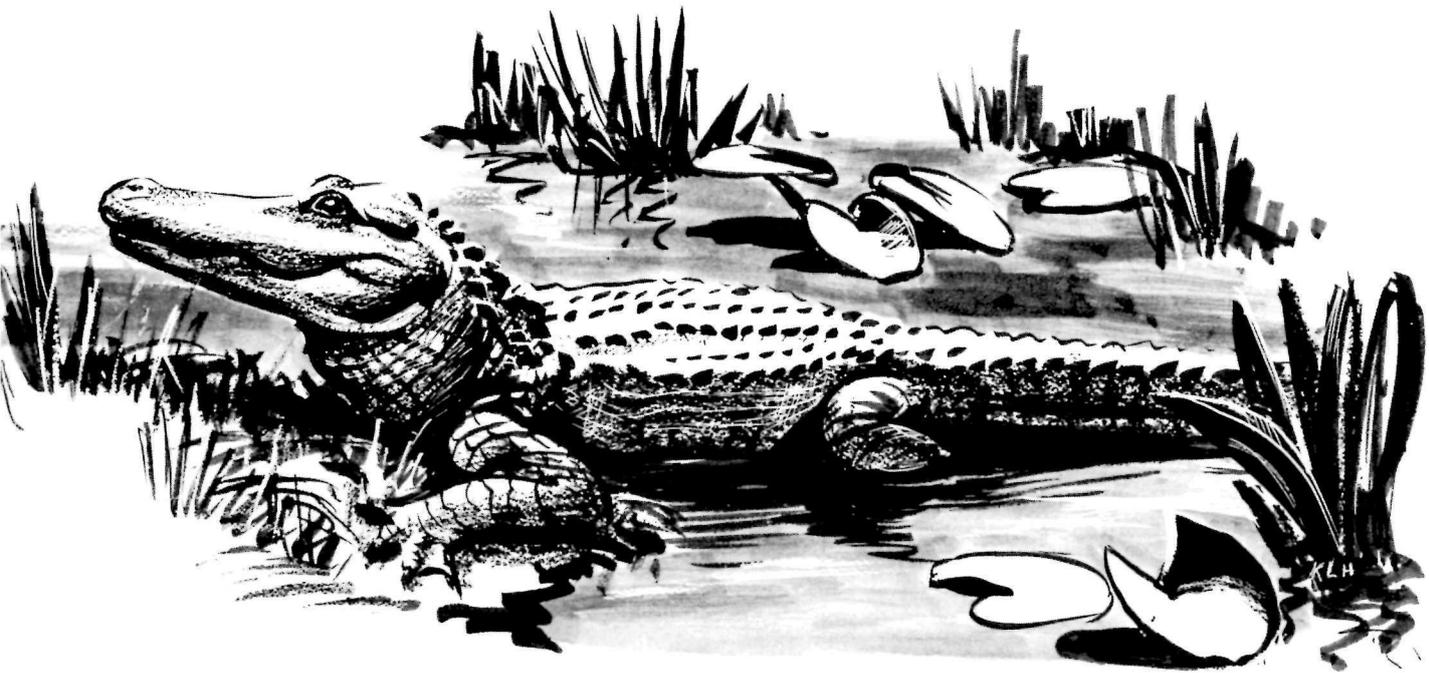
Here and there in the prairies is an island of trees, better known in Okefenokee terminology as a "house" or "hammock." Flowing water courses between prairies and through dense stands of bearded cypress, twisting and turning back upon themselves, all but disappearing in many places, are called "boat runs." These boat runs may be traveled in outboard-motored craft, but in the prairies only light, narrow poleboats may be used. In both cases the services of local guides are an absolute "must." No matter how experienced he may be, a stranger to the swamp is almost sure to be completely confused a few minutes after leaving the boat landing.

ENTRANCE TO OKEFENOKEE is by way of Waycross on the north, Folkston on the east, and

Fargo on the west, in each case marked by the sign of the flying goose—the Fish and Wildlife Service refuge shield. Facilities are not of a deluxe order, but simple. Most of the visitors are fishermen, for whom Okefenokee's fruitful waters are its best recreational feature.

Largemouth bass, sunfish, pickerel, catfish, and bowfin are the principal species taken for local fish fries. While cane poles in the hands of nearby residents account for the largest catches, the bait-rod fisherman with his array of plugs and spoons takes some exceptionally large bass, and in recent years the fly rod has become popular, especially with out-of-State anglers. A unique type of lure originated by swamp men is the "dabblor," made by cutting a piece of leather shoe top into the shape of a lizard.

There are upward of 5,000 alligators in the swamp. In the heat of the day they float like rough-barked logs on the brown water. At night their protruding eyes shine like huge rubies when caught in the rays of a flashlight.

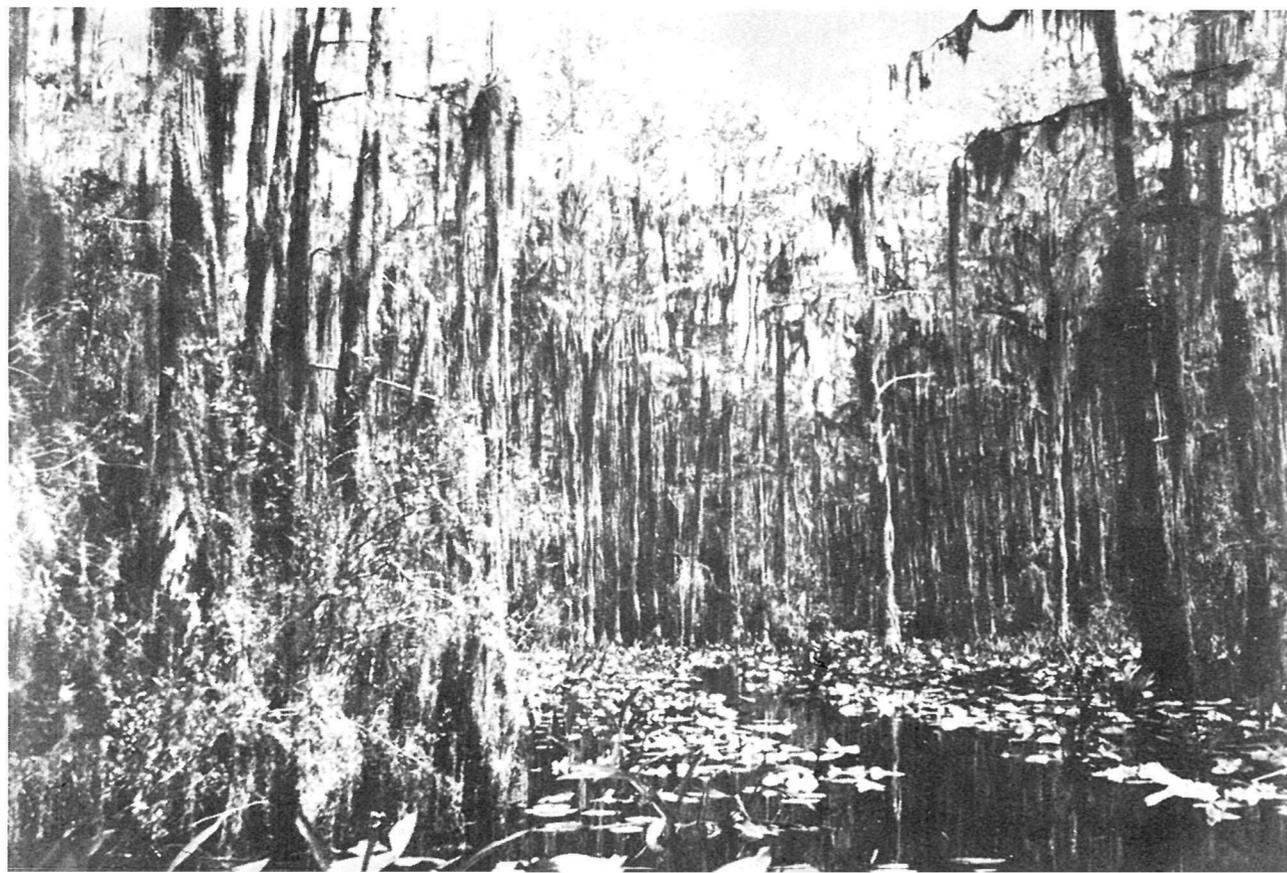




Upper left: Okefenokee's "prairies" are shallow expanses of crystal water lush with colorful aquatic blooms; dotted with "houses" on which shrubs and trees have taken root.

Lower left: The water, now sepia-toned, flows sluggishly in meandering "boat runs" through the eerie shadows of moss-bearded cypress.

Below: Minnie's Lake is but one of Okefenokee's many dark pools where alligators abound, and where the splashes of feeding fish stir anglers' hopes.





Pileated woodpeckers and smaller species drum endlessly on the shells of dead trees by day.

Owls of several kinds fill the soft night air with their mysterious calls.

While Okefenokee has its share of insect life, the daylight visitor is not greatly troubled with stinging varieties. Ticks occur infrequently, and the entire area is completely free from malaria. Men who have spent the greater part of their lives in and about the swamp declare it to be a remarkably healthy locality.

IN A SENSE OKEFENOKEE IS NOT A SWAMP AT ALL, but a saucer-shaped depression fed to a great extent by clear, bubbling springs in the prairies. Before the dawn of history it is believed to have been part of an ancient sea. It is 110 to 130 feet above present sea level, and the water is in constant circulation as it drains away from a series of ridges in the center of the marsh into two distinct watersheds. In the southeast, numerous channels meander long distances before entering St. Mary's River, emptying finally into the Atlantic Ocean after marking the southern boundary of Georgia for several miles. But the principal outlet is beautiful, long immortalized Suwannee River, which has its source deep in the heart of Okefenokee and which flows west-





Okefenokee's raccoon population is so large that it can now be classed as one of the swamp's many interesting features.

ward, then southward, into the Gulf of Mexico near Cedar Keys, Fla. As the water drains off the prairies into the cypress forests it becomes stained the color of tea.

In addition to countless numbers of islands which are anchored to the bottom by the roots, there are many floating isles. One may encounter such an isle today in the middle of a lake; in a week it is nowhere in sight. These itinerant islands consist of vegetative masses laced together solidly enough to provide a bed for falling leaves and seeds, while at the same time their own trailing roots have not yet secured a firm grip on the bottom. Eventually, of course, these "floaters" finally become stationary and may in time attain the status of hammocks covered by a dense growth of broad-leafed trees, or "bays," on which groves of cypress have developed. Among the several good-sized islands is Billy's

Island, 4 miles long, famous as the final stronghold of the Seminoles and later as the site of Fort Walker. Once it boasted a population of 600 and a motion picture theater, but it is now all but reclaimed by jungle-like growth. Cow-house Island, on which cattle farming was once attempted, has also reverted to the wild.

In Okefenokee parlance a lake may be an alligator hole thrashed out among the lily pads, a widening in the boat channels, or a sizable body of open water. The distinction is far from clear, especially when these so-called lakes all interconnect by narrow boat runs or merge into bewildering, seemingly endless, series of submerged, lily-covered prairies.

AS A REFUGE OKEFENOKEE DEFIES CLASSIFICATION. Thinking only of its deer, bear, raccoon, opossum, and otter populations, it could be rated as



Around Okefenokee's campfires the black bear is usually the principal topic of conversation. Fish stories pale when compared with the swamp's endless "b'ar" tales.

a mammal reservation. Its summer-nesting wood ducks, its flocks of wintering ringnecks, mallards, pintails, and black ducks give it considerable value as a migratory waterfowl refuge. Its cranes, egrets, ibises, and herons give the swamp some status as a sanctuary for big water birds. Its incredible numbers of woodpeckers, among which there is the slim possibility of finding the all but extinct ivory-billed species, cannot be ignored. Steadily mounting alligator populations, now past the 5,000 mark, have become a noticeable feature.

But Okefenokee is more than a general wildlife refuge. It represents an attempt to preserve an area of primitive Americana; to defend against further encroachment existing stands of virgin cypress, now among the best in the South, and to reforest sections denuded by woodcutters, turpentine gatherers, and fires; to hold in trust for all the people—sightseers, students, naturalists, artists, photographers, fishermen—this amazing lost world with its beautiful mirrored effects.

In its management of the swamp the Fish and Wildlife Service plans no roads into Okefenokee beyond administrative needs, nor any other development which might mar its inherent attractions. Nature itself is the landscaper. Already stands of young cypress have hidden the stumps in the great bays, and eventually will rear a new generation of bearded giants to replace the old. Less time will be required for gum trees and pines. Preserving these woodlands calls for vigilant, unceasing fire patrols.

Maintaining water levels is another management problem. The lush aquatic vegetation of Okefenokee acts as a sponge, soaking up rainfall in the wet seasons, releasing it slowly to the torrid heat of the summer sun. But already there have been drought periods when the

prairies became dry enough to burn, when countless millions of fish and amphibians were lost. This not only had bad effects on sport fishing for several years thereafter, but resulted in scarcity of wading birds which live on this type of food. First of all, then, the Service will countenance no more drainage projects. It may go a step in the other direction by placing a sill across Suwannee River, the principal outlet, to help stabilize water levels in time of need.

Law enforcement remains one of the principal duties of management. In spite of generally excellent cooperation by nearby residents, it must be realized that Okefenokee was for many years a hunting and trapping paradise. Old habits sometimes die hard. Chief source of temptation today is the 'gator, whose knobby hide has tripled in value within a decade and which has now become exceedingly plentiful within the refuge.

In the dark of night the 'gators eyes shine like rubies when caught in the beam of a flashlight, and the floating animal will allow a boat to be poled within a yard or two before taking alarm. "Shining 'gators" persists as one of the most troublesome problems of Okefenokee's guardians, necessitating regular patrols by officers skilled in the ways of the transgressor, thoroughly experienced in the lore of the swamp.

FROM THE NORTH, the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge may be reached by following U. S. Highway 1 to Waycross, Ga., location of the headquarters office. Here a nonprofit organization called the Okefenokee Park Associa-

The swamp visitor may see several water snakes, black moccasins, or perhaps a canebrake or diamond-back rattlesnake during his visit, although these reptiles are not overly plentiful.

tion has leased 1,200 acres just north of the refuge boundary and has developed facilities especially for passing tourists. Short rides in electric boats through a dark cypress swamp are provided. For those who desire panoramic views, a 75-foot tower has been erected. A small zoo houses many creatures peculiar to Okefenokee.

About 35 miles southeast from Waycross the autoist enters Folkston, Ga., where the sign of the flying goose points the way to subheadquarters at Camp Cornelia. Small boats are available here for fishing and sightseeing along "Jackson's Folly" canal and into a series of lily-covered prairies noted for their amazing reflections. An alternate route is from Waycross south along the west side on U. S. Highway 84 and State Highway 89 to Fargo, Ga., then by a narrow dirt road to a fishing camp operated by special concession. The west side of the swamp probably has the more spectacular scenery, combining heavy forests of bearded cypress standing knee-deep in the dark waters, stretches of open water, and broad vistas of blooming prairies.

In all cases where the visitor wishes to penetrate beyond the perimeter of Okefenokee's watery wilderness, the use of local guides is essential.





LOCATION AND ROUTES OF APPROACH TO THE OKEFENOKEE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

